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Public access to the bluffs overlooking Lake Michigan on the North Shore is as scarce as the rare birds and plants that make the unique ecosystem their home. But an estimated \$8 million restoration project under way near historic Ft. Sheridan in Highland Park includes a welcome mat for all nature lovers.

The project was begun this spring and it includes a 1-mile trail at the top of the 60-foot craggy, tree-lined bluff overlooking the lake and beach—shoreline that has been off-limits to the general public for more than a century.

"We're committed to opening this property up to everyone," said Joyce O'Keefe, deputy director of Openlands, a non-profit conservation group overseeing the project.

Plans for the 77-acre site also include restoration of the beach and three ravines, home to more than 100 species of birds, including peregrine falcons and the threatened Henslow's sparrow, and rare plants such as buffaloberry and seaside spurge.

Scheduled to open in phases over the next three years, the new Openlands Lakeshore Preserve at Ft. Sheridan will provide one of only a few views of the lake from bluffs carved by glaciers thousands of years ago.

The trail will be the only one open to the public on the bluffs, O'Keefe said. Multimillion-dollar estates and summer cottages have occupied most of the bluffs from Winnetka to Lake Bluff since the late 1800s.

Construction of the former Army base, named after Civil War Gen. Philip H. Sheridan, who championed its creation, began in 1888. Originally built to make troops available in case of civil unrest like the Haymarket labor riots of 1886 that left at least 10 Chicago police officers and labor demonstrators dead, the fort served mostly as a training and administrative base until it

closed in 1993.

The Army and Navy still station reserve units at the former fort, but a large chunk of the 714 acres it once occupied is now owned by Highland Park and the Lake County Forest Preserve District. The district built a three-quarter mile beach trail on the north end of the fort two years ago, giving the public its first access to the shoreline since Ft. Sheridan opened.

When the Navy indicated it would be willing to give up some of its property, Openlands sought federal legislation to acquire the property at no cost with the stipulation it be preserved for the public's enjoyment.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), a Navy Reserve officer who lives in the Town of Ft. Sheridan housing development on the 125-acre Highland Park part of the property, helped broker the unusual land transfer in 2004. In March, Openlands took ownership of about one-third of its 77 acres, including the Bartlett Ravine.

The ravine, next to the Town of Ft. Sheridan, has experienced both natural and manmade erosion that has weakened some slopes that wind down to the lake. Openlands hopes to build a 100-foot buffer along the top of the ravine and bluffs to reduce the velocity of storm-water runoff, O'Keefe said.

Openlands officials met last week with Town of Ft. Sheridan residents to discuss the project and to round up a few volunteers, O'Keefe said. "We're hoping we can get our new neighbors excited." Jim Fitzgerald, who lives at the Town of Ft. Sheridan, said reaction from residents has been overwhelmingly positive. "We're all very excited about it because we know it will be done right," he said.

Openlands officials hope to attract donations from the public and private sectors. The beach is expected to open next summer, O'Keefe said.